Stendhal

San Francesco a Ripa*

Translated by Susan Ashe

Ariste and Dorante dealt with this subject, which prompted Eraste to deal with it as well.

30 September

This is the translation of an account left by an Italian antiquary of a Roman princess's love affair with a Frenchman. The events took place at the outset of the last century — in 1726. Rome in that day blossomed with every abuse of nepotism. Never had the papal court glittered more brilliantly. It was the reign of Benedict XIII, Pierfrancesco Orsini — or, rather, of his nephew Prince Campobasso, who administered in the pope's name all affairs of state both great and small. From everywhere foreigners converged on Rome; Italian princes and Spanish grandees, still rich with New World gold, gathered there in droves. There every man of wealth and power felt himself above the law. Gallantry and pomp seemed to be the sole concern of the great assembly of foreigners and native Italians.

The pope's two nieces, Countess Orsini and Princess Campobasso, shared between them their uncle's power and the homage of the court. Even in the lowest ranks of society their beauty would have set them apart. L'Orsini, as she was familiarly known in Rome, was gay and capricious; la Campobasso, sensitive and devout. But this sensitive soul was prone to the most violent passions. Though they met daily at the pope's court and often in their own homes, these ladies, without being sworn enemies, were rivals in everything — beauty, influence, wealth.

Countess Orsini, less pretty, but sparkling, vivacious, bustling, scheming, had lovers to whom she paid scarce attention and who reigned for but a day. It was her pleasure to greet two hundred people in her salons and to preside there. She laughed at her cousin Princess Campobasso who, having let herself be seen everywhere three years in a row with a Spanish duke, in the end

*A church in Rome, in Trastevere.

ordered him — and this under pain of death — to leave Rome within twenty-four hours. "Since this great banishment," said l'Orsini, "my sublime cousin has ceased to smile. For these last few months in particular the poor woman has clearly been dying of boredom or of love, and her husband, who is no fool, has passed off this boredom to our uncle, the pope, as extreme piety. This piety, I expect, will lead her to set out on a pilgrimage to Spain."

Princess Campobasso was very far from lamenting her Spaniard, who, for at least two years, had bored her to death. Had she lamented him, she would have sent for him, since hers was one of those natural, passionate temperaments one comes across not infrequently in Rome. Devout in the extreme, although barely twenty-three and in the full flower of her beauty, she one day threw herself at her uncle's feet, begging him to grant her the papal blessing, which — as is not widely known — absolves all sins, with the exception of two or three heinous ones, even without confession. The good Benedict XIII wept with tenderness. "Rise, my niece," he said. "You have no need of my blessing; in God's eyes you are worthier than I."

In this, despite his infallibility, he was mistaken — as was all Rome. Princess Campobasso was hopelessly in love, her lover shared her passion, yet she was utterly miserable. For several months she had been seeing almost daily the Chevalier de Sénecé, who was the nephew of the Duke of Saint-Aignan, Louis XV's ambassador to Rome.

Son of one of the mistresses of the Regent Philippe d'Orléans, young Sénecé enjoyed the highest patronage in France; for some time a colonel, though barely twenty-two, he had all the appearance of a fop, which was excusable, for he had not the character of one. High spirits, the wish to enjoy everything always, recklessness, courage, kindness were the outstanding traits of this singular personality, and, it could therefore be said, he was a credit to the nation of which he was a perfect specimen. As soon as she set eyes on him, Princess Campobasso singled him out. "But," she told him, "I'm wary of you, you're a Frenchman, and I warn you of one thing. The day it becomes known in Rome that I sometimes receive you secretly, I'll be convinced that you have talked and I will show you no more love."

While playing with love, Princess Campobasso was gripped by a genuine passion. Sénecé had loved her as well, but by now their

affair had gone on for eight months, and time, which inflames anew an Italian lady's passion, kills a Frenchman's. The chevalier's vanity consoled him somewhat for his boredom; he had already sent two or three portraits of the princess to Paris. Moreover, heaped since childhood with all sorts of possessions and advantages, so to speak, he maintained his carefree nature even against the interests of his vanity — that quality which generally keeps the hearts of his countrymen in such anxiety.

Sénecé hadn't the slightest understanding of his mistress's character, which meant that sometimes her odd ways amused him. Often, particularly on the Feast of St. Balbine, her name day, he had to combat the outbursts and the remorse of her sincere, ardent piety. Sénecé had not made her forget religion, as happens to common women in Italy; he had conquered her with sheer strength, and the battle was frequently renewed.

This obstacle, the first which this young man, so endowed by fortune, had met in his life, amused him and kept alive his habit of being tender and attentive to the princess. From time to time he believed it his duty to love her. There was another, not in the least romantic, reason. Sénecé had only one confidant, who was the ambassador, the Duke of Saint-Aignan, to whom he rendered certain services by means of the princess, who knew all that went on in court. The importance he gained in the eyes of the ambassador greatly flattered him.

Princess Campobasso, in contrast to Sénecé, was not in the least influenced by her lover's social advantages. To be loved or not to be loved was all that counted to her. "I am sacrificing my eternal happiness for him," she told herself. "He, a heretic, a Frenchman, can make no equal sacrifice for me." But each time the chevalier came to her, his gaiety, which was so agreeable, so inexhaustible, and yet so spontaneous, amazed and charmed the princess's heart. At the sight of him, all that she had made up her mind to say to him, all her dark ideas, vanished. This state of mind, so new to her haughty soul, lasted long after Sénecé had left her. In the end she found she could not think, she could not live far from Sénecé.

The fashion in Rome, which for two centuries had leaned toward Spaniards, began to return a little to the French. The sort of person who spreads pleasure and cheer all around whenever he comes on the scene began to be appreciated. In those days this character did not exist anywhere but in France, and since the

Revolution of 1789 he exists nowhere at all. Carefreeness is essential to this continual gaiety, and there is no longer any carefreeness in France for a professional soldier nor even for a man of genius, if there are any.

War has been declared between men of Sénecé's class and the rest of the country. Rome, too, was very different then from what it is now. In 1726, no one suspected what was to happen sixty-seven years later, when the people, in the pay of a few parish priests, massacred the Jacobin, Basseville, who, so he said, wanted to civilize the capital of the Christian world.

Face to face with Sénecé, Princess Campobasso had for the first time lost her power of reasoning, had found herself either in heaven or hideously miserable for things outside the realms of reason. In such a rigid, sincere person, once Sénecé had overcome religion — which had nothing to do with reason — love was bound to increase rapidly to the most unbridled passion.

The princess had singled out Monsignor Ferraterra, whose advancement she had taken in hand. What were her suspicions when Ferraterra reported that not only did Sénecé go more often than usual to l'Orsini's palace but that he was also the cause of the countess's dismissing a widely-known eunuch, her acknowledged lover of the past several weeks!

Our story begins on the evening of the day on which Princess Campobasso received this fateful news. She sat motionless in a huge gilt leather armchair. Set beside her on a small black marble table, two large, longstemmed, silver lamps, masterpieces of the famed Benvenuto Cellini, lit up or, rather, exaggerated the shadows in the immense ground-floor hall of her palace, which was hung with age-blackened paintings; for even in that period, the reign of the great painters was far in the past.

Facing the princess and almost at her feet, on a small ebony chair adorned with heavy gold ornamentation, young Sénecé had just draped his elegant figure. The princess was gazing at him and, far from flying to him and throwing herself into his arms, she had not spoken a single word to him since he entered the room.

In 1726, Paris already reigned as a city of elegance and high fashion. Sénecé regularly had couriers bring in anything that might set off the charms of one of France's handsomest men. In spite of the self-assurance so natural to a man of his rank — whose first campaign had been waged with beauties of the

Regent's court under the command of his uncle, the notorious Cannillac, who was one of that prince's roués — it was soon easy to read a certain embarrassment in Sénecé's expression. The princess's lovely blond hair was somewhat disheveled; her huge deep blue eyes were riveted on him; their look was unfathomable. Was there deadly vengeance in that look, or only the earnestness of impassioned love?

"So you no longer love me," she said at last, her voice strained.

A lengthy silence followed this declaration of war. It pained the princess to deprive herself of Sénecé's charm, for, as long as she picked no quarrel with him, he was ready to babble a dozen foolish things to her; but she was too proud to put off making her position plain. A flirt suffers jealousy through self-love; a loose woman, from habit; a woman who loves sincerely and passionately knows her rights. This point of view, peculiar to Roman passion, fascinated Sénecé; in it he saw depth and self-doubt; one could glimpse the soul naked, so to speak. Countess Orsini had no such charm.

Meanwhile, as on this occasion the silence was unusually drawn out, the young Frenchman, who was not well versed in the art of probing the hidden feelings of an Italian heart, noted in the princess an air of calm and reasonableness that put him at his ease. Moreover, at this point he was still slightly vexed. While he made his way through the cellars and underground passages which led him into this lower room from a house next to the Campobasso palace, the pristine lace of his elegant suit, arrived from Paris the evening before, had become covered with cobwebs. The presence of these cobwebs distressed him, for he loathed spiders.

Sénecé, believing he detected a relaxation in the princess's face, thought to avoid a quarrel by turning the reproach aside rather than replying to it; but, made serious by the dilemma in which he found himself, he thought: "Would this perhaps not be the right moment to let her know the truth? She has just raised the question herself, thereby removing half the difficulty. Surely it must be that I am not cut out for love. I've never seen anything as beautiful as this woman, with her extraordinary eyes. Her manners are wanting, she forces me to come to her through disgusting underground passages; but she is the niece of the ruler to whom my king has sent me. Furthermore, she is blond in a coun-

try where all the women are dark; this is quite a distinction. Every day I hear her beauty praised to the skies by people whose testimony is above suspicion, who are a thousand miles from realizing that they are speaking to the happy possessor of such charm. As to the power that a man should have over his mistress, I haven't the slightest uneasiness on that score. If I wished to trouble myself to utter a single word I could take her from her palace, from her furniture, from her sovereign-uncle, and from everything else and bear her to France, to the farthest ends of the provinces, to eke out an existence on one of my estates . . . . Good Lord, the prospect of such an outcome inspires in me only the most vehement resolution never to ask it of her. L'Orsini is much less beautiful; she loves me — if she does love me — a little more than she loves the eunuch Butofaco, whom I sent packing yesterday; but she's a woman of the world, she knows how to live, and I can arrive at her door in a carriage. I'm quite sure she'd never pick a quarrel; she doesn't love me enough for that."

During this long silence, the princess's fixed gaze had not left the young Frenchman's handsome face.

"I will never see him again," she thought. And all at once she threw herself into his arms and covered with kisses that face and those eyes, which no longer sparkled with happiness upon seeing her. The chevalier would have underestimated himself had he not instantly forgotten all his plans for breaking off; but his mistress was much too distraught to forget her jealousy. Seconds later, Sénecé looked at her in astonishment; tears of rage streamed down her cheeks. "What," she said, her voice subdued, "I lower myself to tell him of his change toward me? Do I reproach him for it — I who have sworn to myself never to notice it? And this is not low enough; still I must yield to the passion which his handsome face inspires in me. Oh, vile, vile, vile princess. This must end."

She dried her tears and seemed to regain her composure.

"Chevalier, this must end," she said quite coolly. "You are often at the countess's." Here she grew very pale. "If you love her, go to her every day. So be it. But never come here again." She paused as if in spite of herself. She waited for a word from the chevalier, but no word came. With a slight convulsive movement, she went on, as though setting her teeth: "All this is death to me — and to you — and it must end."

This threat settled the chevalier's wavering mind, which until then had registered only amazement at the unexpected outburst after her initial abandon. He began to laugh.

A sudden flush suffused the princess's cheeks, turning them scarlet. "She will choke with rage," thought the chevalier. "She'll have a stroke." He stepped forward to undo her gown; she pushed him away with a determination and power that he was unused to. Sénecé later remembered that when he tried to take her in his arms, he had heard her talking to herself. He drew back a little — a pointless bit of tact, for she appeared to see him no longer. In a low, intense voice, as if speaking to her confessor, she said to herself: "He insults me, he goads me. Doubtless, at his age and with the indiscretion typical of his countrymen, he will tell l'Orsini of all the humiliation I have opened myself to. I'm wavering. I'm not sure I can resist his handsome face. . . ." There was another pause, which the chevalier found greatly disturbing. The princess at last rose, repeating in a more somber voice: *"This must end."*

The reconciliation had made Sénecé drop the idea of a serious explanation, and he began to talk lightly about an affair which was being much discussed in Rome.

"Let me go, Chevalier," the princess interrupted him, "I am feeling rather unwell."

"This woman is bored," Sénecé told himself, hastening to obey her, "and nothing is as contagious as boredom." With her eyes the princess followed him to the end of the room. "And I was about to fling my life away," she said to herself with a bitter smile. "Luckily his ill-timed banter has brought me to my senses. How foolish of him! How can I love a man who understands me so little? He tries to cheer me with pleasantries when my life and his are at stake. Ah, here it is again, this gloomy temperament of mine, always making me miserable!" In a fury, she rose from her armchair. "How fine his eyes were when he spoke to me! And I must confess the poor man's intentions were kindly meant. Understanding my somber nature, he tried to make me forget the blackness that consumes me instead of asking me the reason for it. Loving and lovable Frenchman! After all, was I happy before I loved him?"

She began to think with delight of her lover's perfections. Little by little, she was led to a consideration of Countess Orsini's charms. Her mind began to clothe everything in black. Indeed,

for the past two months she had been in the grip of a morbid apprehension; no moments were bearable to her but those spent in the company of the chevalier, and yet whenever she wasn't in his arms she spoke to him resentfully.

Her evening had been anguished. Exhausted and seeming slightly calmed by her pain, she decided to speak to the chevalier: "For though he has seen my misery, he does not know what gives rise to it. Perhaps he does not love the countess. Perhaps he visits her house only because a traveler ought to see the society of the country he finds himself in, and in particular its ruler's family. Perhaps if I have Sénecé formally introduced to me, if he can visit me openly, he may spend hour after hour here, as he does at l'Orsini's."

"No," she cried out, enraged, "I would humiliate myself by speaking out; he will despise me and that's all I will have gained. L'Orsini's flighty character, which I have often deplored, fool that I was, is really more attractive than mine, particularly in the eyes of a Frenchman. As for me, I was made to bore myself with a Spaniard. What's more absurd than always being serious, as if life itself weren't serious enough? What will become of me when I no longer have my chevalier to give me life, to breathe into my heart the flame I lack?"

She had ordered her gate closed, but this did not apply to Monsignor Ferraterra, who came to report to her what had gone on at Countess Orsini's until one o'clock in the morning. Until now the prelate had served the princess's love affairs in good faith, but after this evening he was quite sure that Sénecé would soon do his best to be with Countess Orsini, if that were not already the case.

"The pious princess," thought he, "would be more useful to me than a society woman. There will always be someone she prefers to me; he will be her lover, and if one day this lover is a Roman he can have an uncle to make a cardinal. If I win her back to the faith, it's her confessor to whom she will turn first and with all the fire of her temperament. . . . What may I not hope of her with her uncle?" And the ambitious prelate lost himself in a glorious future; he saw the princess throwing herself at her uncle's feet to induce the pope to confer the cardinal's hat upon him. The pope would be very grateful for what he was about to undertake. . . . As soon as the princess was reunited with

the Church, he would send the pope irrefutable proof of her affair with the young Frenchman. Pious, sincere, and detesting the French, His Holiness would be eternally grateful to the person instrumental in putting an end to an affair so trying to him. Ferraterra belonged to the nobility of Ferrara; he was rich, he was over fifty years old. Encouraged by the imminent prospect of the cardinal's hat, he achieved wonders, daring to change abruptly his role with the princess. During the two months that Sénecé had plainly been neglecting her, it might have been dangerous to attack him, for in his turn the prelate, not really understanding Sénecé, believed him to be ambitious.

The reader would find overlong the conversation between the young princess, stricken with love and jealousy, and the ambitious prelate. Ferraterra began with the fullest admission of the melancholy truth. After such a shattering beginning, it was not hard for him to awaken all the feelings of religion and of impassioned piety which were but lying dormant in the depths of the young Roman's heart; her faith was genuine. "All sinful passion must end in unhappiness and dishonor," the prelate told her. It was broad daylight when he left the Campobasso palace. He had exacted from the newly-reformed princess the promise not to receive Sénecé that day. This promise had been easy for the princess. She believed herself devout, and, in fact, was loath to make herself despicable in the chevalier's eyes by her weakness.

Her resolve held firm until four o'clock, the time of the chevalier's expected visit. He came along the street behind the palace garden, saw the signal which meant that a meeting was impossible, and happily went on straight to Countess Orsini's.

Little by little, Princess Campobasso felt as if she were going mad. The wildest ideas and decisions followed rapidly one upon the other. All at once, she rushed down the great staircase of her palace as if out of her mind and, climbing into her carriage, called out to the coachman: "Orsini Palace."

Her extreme unhappiness drove her, almost in spite of herself, to her cousin's. She found her in the company of some fifty visitors. All the spirited, ambitious people of Rome, unable to find a berth at the Campobasso palace, flowed on to Orsini's. The princess's arrival caused a commotion; everyone drew back in respect. Deigning to notice no one, the princess looked at her rival, struck by her, and every one of her cousin's graces was a dagger's thrust to her heart. After the first exchange of com-

pliments, l'Orsini, observing her cousin's preoccupied silence, resumed her offhand, vivacious conversation.

"How much better her gaiety suits the chevalier than my tiresome, mad passion," the princess told herself.

In a confused transport of admiration and hatred, she threw her arms round the countess's neck. All she could see were her cousin's charms; from close up, as from afar, they seemed equally enticing. She compared their hair, their eyes, their complexions. Following this strange examination, she was stricken with horror and disgust at herself. Everything about her rival seemed superior, more seductive.

Standing there and full of gloom, Princess Campobasso was like a basalt statue in the midst of the noisy, gesturing crowd. People came and went; the commotion annoyed and offended the princess. But what was to come over her when suddenly she heard Monsieur de Sénecé announced! It had been agreed from the outset of their affair that he would speak to her very little in public, as was only fitting a foreign diplomat who two or three times a month met the niece of the ruler to whose court he was assigned.

Sénecé greeted her with his customary respect and gravity; then, turning back to Countess Orsini, he once again fell into the lighthearted, almost familiar tone that a man uses with an intelligent woman with whom he is on intimate terms and whom he sees every day. Princess Campobasso was crushed by it. "The Countess shows me how I should behave," she said to herself. "That's what I should be like but never will, however!"

She left in the utmost despair into which a person can sink, half decided to take poison. All the pleasures her love for Sénecé had given her could not offset the extreme anguish into which she was plunged the whole of that long night. It might be said that these Romans have a capacity for suffering unknown to other women.

The next day, Sénecé came along and again saw the negative signal. He went off cheerfully, but he was somewhat annoyed. "Was that my farewell, then, that she gave me the other day? I want to see her in tears," said his vanity. He felt a twinge of love at losing forever such a beautiful woman, a pope's niece. Leaving his carriage, he entered the dirty underground passages which he found so disagreeable and forced the door of the great hall on the ground floor, where the princess always received him.

"What! You dare show your face here!" the princess said in amazement.

"Her astonishment seems less than genuine," thought the young Frenchman. "She uses this room only when she's expecting me."

The chevalier took her hand; she trembled. Her eyes filled with tears; she seemed so beautiful to him that for an instant he was overcome with love. For her part, forgetting all the vows she had made to religion in the last two days, she threw herself into his arms, utterly happy. "This is the happiness l'Orsini now enjoys!" Sénecé, misunderstanding the Roman temperament, as usual, thought she wanted to part from him in a friendly way, in defiance of custom. "It wouldn't do, attached as I am to the royal embassy, to have as a mortal enemy (for that she would be) the niece of the sovereign to whose court I am engaged." Quite proud of the felicitous conclusion he believed he had reached, Sénecé began to reason with her. They had a most pleasant relationship; why could they not be very happy? What, in fact, was there to blame him for? Love would give way to a close, affectionate friendship. He at once begged the privilege of returning from time to time to the place where they now found themselves; their meetings would always be tender.

At first the princess did not understand. When his meaning became clear, she stood there in horror, transfixed, staring. At this mention of "tender meetings," she broke in, her voice seeming to come from the depths of her soul, and said slowly: "In other words, you find me, after all, pretty enough to be a girl hired for your use!"

"But my dear, good friend, isn't our self-respect safe?" replied Sénecé, he too now truly astonished. "How can you possibly complain? Luckily, our relationship has never been suspected by anyone. I am a man of honor; I give you my word once again that no living soul will ever know of the happiness I have enjoyed."

"Not even Countess Orsini?" she said in a cold tone that once more deceived the chevalier.

"Have I ever named those I loved before becoming your slave?" said the chevalier naively.

"Despite my complete trust in your word of honor, it's still a risk I will not run," the princess said with a look of determination that at last began to worry the young Frenchman. "Good-

bye, Chevalier!" And, as he was hesitant in making his way out, "Come," she said to him, "kiss me."

He thought she must be relenting. Then, in a firm voice, she said, "Farewell, Chevalier."

The princess sent for Ferraterra. "I want to be avenged," she told him. The prelate was thrilled. "She is going to compromise herself; she's mine forever."

Two days later, as the heat was stifling, Sénecé went out into the Corso at midnight to take the air. There all Roman society was to be found. When he tried to get back into his carriage, his lackey could scarcely speak. He was drunk. The coachman had disappeared. Speaking thickly, the lackey said that the coachman had had an argument with an enemy.

"Ha!" laughed Sénecé. "My coachman has enemies!"

On his way home, he was barely two or three streets away from the Corso when he noticed that he was being followed. Some four or five men stopped when he stopped and walked on when he did. "I could swing back and get to the Corso by another route," thought Sénecé. "Bah! These louts aren't worth the trouble; I am well armed." He held his naked dagger in his hand.

In this frame of mind, he made his way along a couple of back streets that grew more and more deserted. He heard the men quickening their step. At that moment, he lifted his eyes and noticed before him a small church served by Franciscan monks, from whose windows came a curious glimmer of light. He threw himself against the door, hammering on it loudly with the handle of his dagger. The men, who appeared to be following him, were some fifty paces off. They started to rush him. A monk opened the door; Sénecé hurled himself into the church; the monk shot back the iron bar of the door. At that very moment, the would-be murderers kicked at the door. "Blasphemers!" said the monk. Sénecé gave him a coin. "They were obviously after me," he said.

The church was lit up by at least a thousand candles.

"What! A service at this hour?" he said to the monk.

"Excellency, there is a dispensation from His Eminence, the Cardinal Vicar."

The whole of the narrow court of the little church of San Francesco a Ripa was taken up by a magnificent bier, and the office of the dead was being sung.

"Who has died? Some prince?" asked Sénecé.

"Undoubtedly," answered the priest, "for no expense has been spared; but it's all lost wax and money. The Father Superior has told us that the deceased died in final impenitence."

Sénecé drew closer. He saw escutcheons of a French form; his curiosity increased; he went right up to the coffin and recognized his own coat of arms! There was a Latin inscription:

Nobilis homo Johannes Norbertus Senece eques decessit Romae.

"The noble and distinguished Seigneur Jean Norbert de Sénecé, Chevalier, died in Rome."

"I am the first man," thought Sénecé, "who has had the honor to be present at his own funeral. As far as I know, only Emperor Charles V gave himself this pleasure. But it bodes ill for me in this church."

He gave the sacristan a second coin. "Father," he said, "let me out of a back door of your monastery."

"Gladly," said the monk.

As soon as he reached the street, Sénecé, a pistol in each hand, set off at top speed. Soon he heard behind him the men who were in pursuit of him. Arriving at his lodgings, he saw that the door was shut and that a man stood before it. "This is it," thought the young Frenchman, about to fire at the man with his pistol when he recognized him as his manservant. "Open the door!" he cried out.

It was open; they rushed in and shut it.

"Oh, sir, I've been looking everywhere for you. I have some sad news for you. Poor Jean, your coachman, has been stabbed to death. The men who killed him spewed out curses against you. Sir, they're after your life."

As the servant spoke, eight gunshots, coming simultaneously from a window opening into the garden, laid Sénecé dead beside his valet. Each was riddled by more than twenty bullets.

Two years later, Princess Campobasso was venerated throughout Rome as the highest model of virtue, and for some time now Monsignor Ferraterra has been a cardinal.

Forgive the writer his errors.